Background:

- Smiling increases positive affect for target.
- Looking at the effects of smiling on choice in online dating without controlling for attractiveness might lead to falsely finding no effect.
- Previous studies report discrepancies between stated and displayed preferences, with higher accuracy for physical traits.
- Most dating websites currently use a match-finding algorithm that relies on stated preferences and does not take into account the effect of smiling on the choice to contact a partner.

Central Research Questions:

1. Does smiling in the profile photo increase the number of contacts a female user receives in online dating?
2. Are the effects of smiling and attractiveness independent?
3. How accurately do stated preferences for happiness and attractiveness reflect displayed preferences?

Methods:

- 36 college-aged females: 2 photos each (smiling and neutral)

  • Each photo was rated by 50 heterosexual college aged males (18-28) on attractiveness and happiness (7-point scale)
  • A different group of 50 heterosexual college-aged males indicated:
    - interest in contacting each female (1 photo/female)
    - importance of happiness and attractiveness (as judged by photo)
  • Displayed preferences estimates: linear regression coefficients for attractiveness and smiling when predicting interest in contacting female

Results:

- Smiling and attractiveness: two main effects

  • Smiling and attractiveness independently increased the dating success of a female (across subjects)
  • Attractiveness had a larger effect on dating interest than smiling (on average 12.5% increase in number of contacts for high vs. low attractiveness vs. 5.6% for smiling vs neutral)
  • Displayed importance of happiness and attractiveness was significantly larger than that of stated importance
  • Only for 34.6% of participants the relative importance of attractiveness and happiness had the same direction for stated and displayed preferences

Conclusion:

1. Females received more contacts when smiling
2. Smiling and attractiveness independently increased the dating success of females
3. Participants’ stated preferences are not an accurate measure of their displayed preferences for smiling and attractiveness

Future Directions:

- Finding neural predictors of displayed preferences and contact-or-not choices
- Exploring effects of gender, race, culture and sexual orientation on preferences

References: